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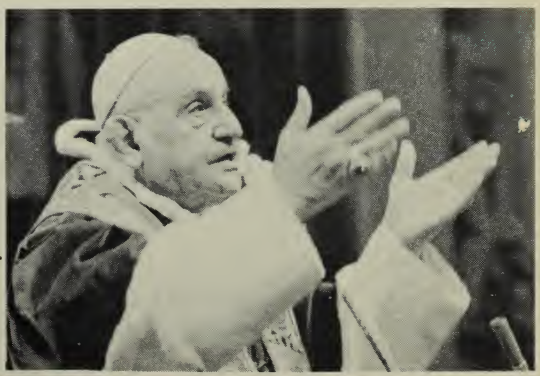
Vatican II Renewal

THE CHURCH AND MODERN MAN

SISTER M. ROBERT, S.S.M.N.



THE CHURCH AND MODERN MAN

VATICAN II RENEWAL SERIES

THE CHURCH AND MODERN MAN

A Commentary on the First Chapter of the Constitution of the Church in the Modern World

By

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

The general purpose of the Second Vatican Council is stated in the beginning of the Constitution on the Liturgy in the following words:

"It is the goal of this sacred Council to intensify the daily growth of Catholics in Christian living; to make more responsive to the requirements of our times, those Church observances which are open to adaptation; to nurture whatever can contribute to the unity of all who believe in Christ; and to strengthen those aspects of the Church which can help summon all of mankind into her embrace" (p. 137, The Documents of Vatican II, Walter M. Abbott).

The constitutions, decrees, and declaration of the Second Vatican Council apply to the vastly changed world of today the principles of the Gospel of Christ.

I commend the Society of St. Paul for publishing this series of PAMPHLETS FOR RENEWAL, explaining the doctrine of the Vatican Council, under the direction of Father William J. Honer and Father Ignatius Staniszewski, S.S.P., editors. May these pamphlets help the readers to understand the true mind of the Fathers of Vatican II and put their teachings into practice.

✠ Most Rev. Stanislaus J. Brzana, D.D.

Auxiliary Bishop of Buffalo

Looking to The World

At the close of the first session of Vatican II, Cardinal Suenens of Belgium asked the assembled bishops of the Catholic Church, "Church of Christ, what do you say of yourself?" Pope John XXIII was watching this session on closed circuit TV. It is reported that he said, "At last, the Fathers are beginning to understand what the Council is for." Evidently Cardinal Suenens' question meant that the Council Fathers were beginning to think as Pope John wished them to think. It was truly coming to be a "Johannine Council."

Cardinal Suenens was not the only one asking questions of the Church in that year of 1962. Pope John had been asking his own questions. Of all Christians he was asking, "Does the Church have meaning for orphans, for poor, lonely women in ancient tenement buildings, for the prisoners whose daily lot is boredom and frustration and loneliness?" He was asking other questions of the learned men, the theologians and cardinals and bishops. He asked, "Who is Christ in this world today? Where is His Kingdom? Is the Church important to men? Can it be? What is causing the world's great sicknesses? Does

the Church bear some of the blame for the world's ills?"

Pope John felt, and significant numbers of the Fathers agreed with him, that the Church had become more and more isolated from the needs of the world. The bark of Peter often rode high over the waves where the children of the world struggled for salvation and sometimes for mere existence. Some called it intuition and others the Holy Spirit, but with sure and steady hand Pope John led the Church to break out of these centuries of isolation. He heard the whisperings of a new Pentecost and he announced an Ecumenical Council; he opened windows and a new fire was enkindled upon the earth.

Before the first session, Pope John had broadcast a message to the whole world concerning the work he hoped it would do. This talk rang out with love for people – for all people. It was filled with deep concern for the world and for its needy. He said, "The world indeed has need of Christ and it is the Church which must bring Christ to the world." He mentioned many human cares – love of family, the problems of daily bread, peace, education, progress, freedom. And he saw each problem as a challenge to men to come together and find their solutions in the great mystery of Christ.

By the end of the first session of the Council, much progress had been made. The Fathers of the Council had rejected a document about the nature of the Church because it lacked a Biblical and historical approach. It was lifeless and legalistic. Nonetheless, in the course of the debate about this document, much thought had gone into the question of the nature of the Church. A commission had been set up to prepare a second draft of this *Constitution on the Church.* After the Fathers had given much

thought to the nature of the Church, Cardinal Suenens' famous question focused their thinking on a second aspect of the Church. Their concern now was to make men see the Church as truly a light to the nations; a People of God in real contact with all men; a People who could offer some answers to the world's great problems. In the same speech in which he had asked what the Church of Christ thought of herself, Cardinal Suenens added:

> We must say something about the very life of the human person, the inviolability of that life, its procreation, its extension in what is called the population explosion. The Church must speak on social justice.... The Church must speak about bringing the Gospel to the poor and some of the conditions the Church must meet to make that Gospel relevant to them.

It is interesting to note that the two men who had worked most closely with Cardinal Suenens in thinking through these problems of the Church in the modern world were Pope John and Cardinal Montini – now Pope Paul VI.

Early in the third session of the Council, the Fathers voted, chapter by chapter, on the decree which will be known to the world as "Lumen Gentium" (*The Constitution on the Church*). The Fathers had gained much knowledge from their struggle to understand and put into writing the inner nature of the Church. Given this background of knowledge, they began immediately the gigantic task of defining the exact role the Church should play in the world today. A new document was to tell the world that the Church wishes to share the lives of

men in order to share with them the Person of Christ. The really big task the Council Fathers faced was to define how the Gospel is to be lived in this world of the 1960's.

The new document, *The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* came to the floor of the Second Vatican Council during the third session. It was an unusual document in many ways. It was the only one of the Council documents that had come to life out of the actual discussions of the Fathers. It was the only one presented in a language other than Latin – French was used for the original text since modern problems are more accurately described in modern terms. It is the only Council document addressed to all humanity. The reason is given in the text itself, "For the Council yearns to explain to *everyone* how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today" (n.2)*

The Church placing herself at the service of mankind is the concept which underlines the entire document. The Church places herself at mankind's disposal because her founder had done so before her: "Whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..." (Matt. 20:27). The Church comes to serve, as Christ came to serve, because of the sublime dignity of each human being. She recognizes in each man the grandeur that God has freely given him. Her recognition is an intense effort to rid herself of what is called, "Triumphalism." For too many years the Church had been served by devoted and heroic men and women. The time had come

* Numbers in parenthesis indicate the paragraph of the Constitution.

when these men and women needed the Church of Christ to support and help them in their needs.

In order to see man as he truly is in this world, the Fathers took a long, hard look at this world. They looked at the horror and at the beauty; at the hatred and the love; at the good and the evil; and their answer to it all is "Gaudium et Spes," joy and hope – the opening words of the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.*

The Fathers were able to identify some of the terrible needs they saw all around them. They recognized the great movements toward world unity which are discernible in today's political, religious and scientific life . . . the international community which is fast becoming a reality. At the same time that they saw in this a Providential action toward the unity of man, they also saw the deep and terrifying wounds that modern life was inflicting upon individual men. They saw men and women and children overwhelmed by alienation, dislocation and fear. They saw large portions of the world's population always hungry. And they saw wealth that brought suffering to those who possessed it as well as to those who were deprived because of it. It was into this world of opposing tendencies, of suffering and of joy, that the Fathers looked in order to find modern man.

The Fathers looked, too, at Christ's Church. They looked deeply into her failures and her triumphs. They looked at other efforts she had made to understand her own nature; and they looked very carefully at the writings of the great modern Popes from Leo XIII to Pius XII. These truly great pontiffs of recent years had diligently prepared the ground upon which the Church could now

work. They had spoken forcefully on the great social questions of their day, on labor, on atheistic communism, on justice to the oppressed. And they had opened doors to scripture study, to examination of the liturgy and to the reform of catechetical work. By looking at this past, the Fathers came to realize that man could be helped and that he was, indeed, very much in need of help. They expressed their desire that all humanity should understand the presence and activity of the Church in the midst of the problems.

Serving The World

The first section of "Gaudium et Spes" is devoted to the "Highest dignity of man" and the hope that the Council cherishes of being able to encourage real brotherhood among men. This brotherhood must find its source in the dignity of each man. In developing the concept of man's dignity, the document is at pains to show that it is this, rather than some sense of obligation, that is basic to the Church's task of serving man. It proclaims that it will never *use* man to serve its own ends, nor will it seek to enlist him as a "convert." It will seek man by accepting him, by loving him, and with him carrying forward the work of Christ Himself. Real unity among men is seen as the logical result of each man understanding his own and his neighbor's dignity.

Change, which has brought so much good and so much suffering, is crucial to man's life in the world. "Gaudium et Spes" looks squarely at the role change plays in man's life. It examines some of the more noticeable changes that have influenced life in this century; it shows how man has benefited by these changes; it shows how man has suffered when he did not subject these

forces to his own welfare. The case of the so-called "new nations" illustrates the type of change that is the concern of this document. Political freedom has brought new dignity and hope to the people of these nations; it has fostered technological and economic maturity. On the other hand, it has often resulted in the cruelest and most frustrating type of social and psychological slavery. So, too, the social order has been completely transformed by the demands of technological society. Wealth for individuals and for whole societies has resulted from scientific discoveries. Yet these same advances have been the source of deep problems for men — depersonalization, insecurity, a rootless existence. The human intellect has broadened its dominion over the powers of nature, over time, over society, even over man himself. And this advance has produced problems of rights, of equal distribution of goods, and even of human dignity itself.

An important outgrowth of the experience of change has been the cultivation of an inquiring spirit. Modern man asks questions — he is a product of the scientific method which means to ask questions. His questioning is not turned off when he comes to the problem of his relationship with God, with his fellowman and with himself. Man's questioning spirit has challenged values which had been thought eternal.

> These new conditions have their impact on religion. On the one hand a more critical ability to distinguish religion from a magical view of the world and from the superstitions which still circulate, purifies religion and exacts day by day a more personal and explicit adherence to faith. As a result many persons are achieving a more vivid sense of God.

On the other hand, growing numbers of people are abandoning religion in practice (n.7).

Change has made man unsure, unable to perceive what the future will bring. Nineteenth century man was proud. He was riding the crest of waves of prosperity and progress. Modern man is humble. He is torn between anxiety and hope; he is shaken, unable to see a purpose in his own existence. Modern man thirsts deeply for a full and free life even as he experiences his own limitations in a multitude of ways. The Council Fathers present this picture of man, not as a statement of despair, but as a challenge to man to control the forces he has unleashed — to bring his religious, moral and intellectual life to the same high level to which he brought the external world. In fact, it is a call to man to find the unities which do exist in this world, to learn to distinguish evil from good and to find in all that is good, the truth, beauty and goodness of Him who created all things. "Gaudium et Spes" is a true call to man to assert his true dignity. It is a call to his highest aspirations — to Christian personalism. It is an invitation to alienated modern man to find his own true identity.

The Highest Dignity of Man

In his search to know himself, to know who he is and why he is, man has to return to the truth of his creation in the image of God. Just as the fact that God exists is probably the most radical statement any man can make, so too, the thousands of seemingly accidental circumstances which caused any one human being to come into existence, prove beyond doubt that God loves each man that He has created. Uncountable numbers of events have shaped man's destiny and each man's existence is the end result of a long series of happenings. This man's father and mother met one day, on a street corner, in school, at a party. And their parents had met somewhere before them, and so on as far back as the mind can trace. And each of these moments contributed to the one, unique, irreplaceable human being. The scientists tell that there are no two identical beings anywhere in our universe. Each stone is different from every other stone. Each ear is different from its mate. And each human being is most uniquely the one person for whom God had prepared for centuries. Even his external surroundings were prepared over long periods of time. Each person is made to be himself. Each is a unique creation. God

made this person, this one human being, and not someone else. And the only reason that man can find why God did this is that God must love him. This is his grandeur and his dignity. This is his purpose and his reason for being. God's love which brought him into being and made him the unique individual he is, is the one all-important reality of his life.

It would seem that God was not satisfied with His own generosity. Not satisfied just to create man, he made man in His own image. He made man capable of knowing and loving him in this way sharing in God's life of knowing and loving Himself.

God made man master over the things of earth so that man might lead those things to contribute to the honor and glory of their Creator. During the discussion on the part of the document which deals with man's duty to gather to himself the elements of the material world and to raise them to the praise of their Creator, Archbishop Hurley of Durban, South Africa called the necessity of studying the use man is to make of material things, the "central theological problem of our century." He praised the work of the great Jesuit scholar Teilhard de Chardin who wrote of the process by which man brings all material creation back to Him from Whom it came. He spoke of St. Paul's epistles in which temporal things are seen as part of the transformation which God plans for the world. All of nature will be found to have meaning in God's plan of salvation just as every action on man's part fits into the Divine plan. Man finds something of his own place in the world in the ability and command that God has given him to restore all things to Himself.

Man and Mankind

With a fine sense of all that is best in modern philosophy and theology, the Council Fathers proceeded to study man in his relationships with other persons. The primary form of interpersonal communion is that which exists between husband and wife. Man has need to examine the depth of meaning in Saint Paul's words, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. This is a great mystery and I take it to mean Christ and His Church" (Eph. 5:31-32). "Gaudium et Spes" hints at the solution to the current discussion of marriage by seeing it as the primary form of interpersonal relationship and as the manifestation of relationships which exist within the Trinity.

In addition to this primary relationship, *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes that man is not a solitary being. His relationships with other men form the foundation upon which much of his happiness depends. Other persons enable him to be and to grow. He learns to know himself in knowing others and he finds himself in being known by others. He truly exists toward others. And one of his

most important duties is to acknowledge his brother as a unique person created by the God who loves him, in the same way that he wishes to be acknowledged himself. Man's vocation is to be expansive to others. His vitality is to be found in self-giving; and he owes this donation of himself to *all* mankind. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Even sin is defined in the context of personal relationships,

> "although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very dawn of history man abused his liberty, at the urging of *personified Evil*" (n.13).

Without hesitation the document states that man, knowing God as the person who had created him and who kept him in existence, set himself against God. Man sought his fulfillment in a person who was evil rather than in a person who was God. It is this first disruption of the proper order between God and man which blinds man's vision – which prevents him from seeing himself truly and from establishing correct relationships with others. Thus sin, personified evil, opens man to the depths of misery at the same moment that the Personal God calls him to the grandeur of Divine life in the great mystery of his death and resurrection. This call to live God's life, an individual call to each unique individual, finds its explanation in Revelation.

It is impossible to understand the full meaning of any one of the Council documents without seeking the meanings of the other documents. The document on Revelation gives us added insight into the meaning of man's dignity

as the Council Fathers saw and explained it. Basically, the document on Divine Revelation is explaining that, at the same time that there is a body of revealed truth which the Church accepts as definitive, there is also a continuing experience of God by man — a personal meeting with God which is always defined by the unique human being to whom God is revealing Himself. He manifests himself to this particular person in the manner and under the circumstances which are best suited to the person. God can make this revelation because man is made in God's image. God shows man that which is Divine in man, that part of man which most clearly mirrors His Creator. Personal experience of God begins when man understands, to a greater or lesser degree, how he is made in God's image. He finds God in himself, in his own nature, in his daily life and in his human relationships. He discovers that the best he has to give to others is that which is himself — that, in him, which is made in the image of God. It is in his understanding of himself as creature, and of God as Creator, that man is most fully human. When he understands himself and as a result of this understanding seeks God, he is most fully a person because as a fully free human being he has done what is his greatest achievement as a man — he has chosen God.

The power of man which raises him above the material universe is his intelligence. It is this power which enables him to pursue wisdom and truth. Man's intellect, standing open to truth, searches always for a more adequate understanding of those things which seem to elude him. He is fascinated, even in a material sense, by the mysterious, by the metaphysical, by that which is defined

to him as infinite. Today man is learning to pass through visible realities to those which are unseen. He is using his intellect to see the structures which underlie all reality. He is realizing the similarity of relationships which are basic to all existence. The popularity of fantasy, for example of St. Exupery's *Little Prince,* the stress on symbolism and abstractionism, are all characteristics of a society which is moving away from crass materialism toward a value system which cannot be measured in dollar signs. *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us that our age has greater need of such realizations than had preceeding generations "if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized" (n.15). The Fathers foresee dire consequences unless men increase in wisdom. If they are to match technological and scientific progress with wisdom and truth, they are going to need vital development — a development which encompasses the whole human person. A real "knowledge explosion" has burst upon the world. It needs orientation toward the Divine Plan.

The Freedom of Man

Two problems which have become sources of intense struggle for man in his search for dignity and self-identity center around freedom and conscience. *Gaudium et Spes* treats of the problem of conscience in a deeply sensitive manner. It defines conscience as a law written in the heart by God and adds that each man will be judged in accordance with his obedience to this law. However, the document adds a beautiful application of the doctrine of conscience to the world at large:

> In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence the more that a correct conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by objective norms of morality (n.16).

Thus conscience is clearly defined as subjective in that it entails a law written in each man's heart, and at the same time as objective, that is, subject to principles and

norms which are not determined by any individual human being. A proper understanding of this teaching on conscience should lead to solutions of many of the disputes about morality today. In all of these problems, man needs to find the middle road between blind adherence to what may or may not be objective norms and a personal interpretation which may or may not be valid.

The teaching of this document on the excellence of liberty is vital to a real concept of personal dignity. The elaboration of this teaching is reserved to another decree, *Religious Freedom,* however, the basic teaching is to be found in *Gaudium et Spes,* also. The document tells us that man's dignity demands that he act always according to a knowing and free choice. It is shown that man acts humanly and freely when he can make a free decision unbiased by any consideration of preference or pressure. Thus, when a man acts honestly, in the light of his own conscience, he is worthy of complete respect in this action. Even if he is objectively wrong, his freedom of conscience must be respected. Freedom implies personal responsibility, responsible judgment and adherence to truth. This statement on liberty implies that man must act knowingly, he must make judgments which are informed, which are based on solid intellectual knowledge. From this follows his inviolable right to the true education which is essential to a true exercise of personal liberty.

The acid test of the Church's new found openness to the world, of her objectivity in judging herself and her sincere desire to practice her belief in the dignity of each man is found in the discussion on atheism. With striking candor, the Constitution admits that the Church must look into herself to find the causes for

the atheist's denial of God. The Council Fathers find that believers themselves have something to do with the beginnings of atheism. They ask what Christians have become that atheism should appear to millions as a value, even as a supreme value, while Christianity does not. Too often it is atheism which seems to demand total commitment while belief in God follows well-worn paths of traditional complacency. In keeping with the positive approach of the entire Council, the Fathers tell us that the remedy for atheism must be found in "the witness of a living and mature faith." This faith must so penetrate the believer's life that he really witnesses to the communion with God which is Christian life. It is the call to union with God which is the outstanding aspect of man's dignity. Brotherly charity, which must be more than simple good living, which is a revelation of God's presence among His People, is the answer the Fathers of Vatican II offer to modern atheism. And they call all men, believers and unbelievers alike, to enter into dialogue in which the rights of all are respected.

The Mystery of Man in The Church

Man is a mystery. Man's dignity is a mystery because it is rooted in the mystery of Christ. "The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (n.22). Man's growing realization that authentic reality is largely invisible, that his real self is often his hidden self, that the human meanings of everyday events are beyond external appearances, has led to a greater appreciation of the significance of man's existence in a spiritual universe. Contemporary man is better able than were his predecessors to sense the depth of meaning in the story of salvation which is the mystery of the Church, which is the mystery of Christ. Man sees himself fully and truly only when he sees himself in Christ sharing the One Bread of which all who are one Body partake (1 Cor. 10:16). It is through faith and baptism that human integrity is restored. It is through his "plunging" into the death and resurrection of Christ that man can become fully human, fully according to his own nature. Faith alone would have been sufficient, had man no body: sacraments, signs which speak to man's body, are necessary to man who is body *and* soul.

The reality of life in Christ demands deep and prayerful thought on the part of all Christians. It is the essence of Christianity. It is the supreme dignity of man. The implications of this statement are astounding. "He who is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man" (n.22). Because Christ assumed human nature and because it was Christ who was assumed into heaven and established as Lord over all creation, human nature as assumed and established in an intimate relationship with the Trinity. In Christ, man has fully responded to God and God has fully revealed Himself to man. Thus all men are offered the possibility of living the Paschal mystery of Christ. All men are invited to share in the ultimate destiny of man, the life of the Godhead.

> All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery (n.22).

The life of union with God that *Gaudium et Spes* presents as the ultimate dignity of man is eternal life. It is sharing God's very life, with no danger that the union will ever end. But this document, a *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* is principally concerned with the reality of man in the here and now. It is concerned with man's union with God, with his incorporation into Christ on earth. This document makes clear that man can only receive salvation and can only want it

in union with God who offers it to him. It is built around the important fact that God offers this to man in this situation and in this age. It accepts the age with its faults and its glories, and it sees the glorious destiny of man called in this world to union with his Creator.

It is part of the glorious mission of mankind to know that God loves man and allows Himself to be loved in return. Man is not a spiritual athlete parrying and thrusting to purchase his salvation from an ever-vigilant task-master. He is a creature who is loved by his Creator and is invited to live the very life of this Creator. This life of God, into which man can be eternally moving, is a life of love, of communion, of glory. It is the final destiny of man and of men. It is the true dignity of man, indeed, the only dignity.

In answer to Cardinal Suenens' question, "Church of Christ, what do you say of yourself?" the Council Fathers have written a vibrant answer. The Church of Christ knows herself to be the total and permanent presence of men before God and of men to one another. She acknowledges the weakness and failures of the past and of the present. And she is finding the solution to the problems of the world in the Paschal mystery, the mystery of the God-Man, in the great mystery of man raised to the divine dignity of Christ. The Christian man, raised to likeness to the Son of God through baptism, becomes capable of living the new law of love. The Church of Christ is the means by which man is renewed from within and strengthened to hope in the resurrection of the God-Man which is the pledge of his own resurrection.

Such is the mystery of man, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by His death (n.22).